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ABSTRACT

Information on the existence of written exit criteria was obtained from 178 surveys completed by personnel of early childhood education programs for handicapped children across the United States. Descriptions of criteria being used to make decisions about a child leaving a program also were provided. Results indicated that approximately half of the programs had formal written exit criteria and half did not. The most commonly cited criterion for children exiting a program was chronological age. Results also suggested that other factors, such as formal test results, team staffing decisions, and the child's developmental skill level, play a role in determining whether a child will exit from a program. Significant differences appear to exist between exit criteria listed by programs with formal written exit criteria and those without. In general, the basis for dismissing children from various programs appears to vary widely across and within states. (Author)

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RESEARCH REPORT #4

EXIT CRITERIA IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS FOR HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

Martha L. Thurlow, Camilla A. Lehr, and James E. Ysseldyke

EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSESSMENT PROJECT

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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September, 1985

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Abstract

Information on the existence of written exit criteria was obtained from 178 surveys completed by early childhood education programs for handicapped children across the United States. Descriptions of criteria being used to make decisions about a child leaving a program also were provided. Results indicated that approximately half of the programs had formal written exit criteria and half did not. The most commonly cited criterion for children exiting a program was chronological age. Results also suggested that other factors, such as formal test results, team staffing decisions, and the child's developmental skill level, play a role in determining whether a child will exit from a program. Significant differences appear to exist between exit criteria listed by programs with formal written exit criteria and those without. In general, the basis for dismissing children from various programs appears to vary widely across and within states.

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Exit Criteria in Early Childhood Programs for Handicapped Children

Martha L. Thurlow, Camilla A. Lehr, and James E. Ysseldyke

With the enactment of Public Law 94-142, appropriate educational placement and service became the right of all children. Baker and Gottlieb (1980) believe that the principal concern of Public Law 94-142 is the notion that children be mainstreamed and served in the least restrictive environment. However, the extent to which children who are receiving special services exit from special education programs into mainstream classrooms is uncertain.

Much has been written about the early identification of children with handicaps and subsequent interventions used with them (Caldwell, 1970; Hobbs, 1975; Lichtenstein & Ireton, 1984). In fact, all states have special education rules and regulations that specify eligibility criteria for receiving special education services. A major assumption of early identification and placement is that early intervention produces a significant positive effect (Lichtenstein & Ireton, 1984; Lidz, 1983). Longitudinal studies have documented several benefits of early intervention, including higher rates of high school graduation and employment, as well as favorable cost/benefit analyses (Berruta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, & Weikart, 1984; Weikert, Bond, & McNeil, 1978; Weiss, 1981). But very little has been written on the turnover of children from special education to regular education services. Only one study was found that described reasons for exit from a program (U.S. Department of Education, 1985). We do not know what causes a child to become firmly entrenched in an early special education program or what triggers exit from it.

The criteria for eligibility differ considerably among states, and within states. Typically, there is considerable variation in the extent to which local education agencies even use the state criteria. Although the Seventh Annual Report to Congress (U.S. Department of Education, 1985) notes that in 1984 most states were involved actively in the development or revision of eligibility criteria, development of criteria for exit was not even mentioned. It is hypothesized that criteria for exit from a program is similarly inconsistent across and within states.

The purpose of this study was to conduct a nationwide survey of preschool programs that serve handicapped children in order to determine the extent to which written exit criteria exist. If criteria did not exist in a program, we obtained information on the actual information being used to decide that a child is ready to leave a special early intervention program.

Method

Subjects

Lists of early childhood special education programs were obtained from eight states distributed across four United States regions: two from the Northeast, two from the North Central, two from the West, and two from the South. The information that was provided on each list varied extensively from state to state. For example, one list (from state D) was very complete and provided the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of contact persons, consultants, and teachers serving young handicapped children in 1984-85, resulting in a

compilation of 170 identifiable programs. In contrast, one correspondent sent the names of nine special education directors, listed as those who might have the information requested. In cases where identifiable programs were not specifically listed, a letter was sent to contact persons requesting their aid in distributing several postcards to programs in their state. In all, excluding state D which listed 170 identifiable programs, 245 postcards were sent to seven states. The number of programs to which postcards were sent in a single state varied from 7 to 67 ($\bar{X}$ = 35 per state). Excluding state D, which was mailed 170 individual postcards each with a letter, 196 letters (with varying numbers of postcards) were mailed to seven states ($\bar{X}$ = 28 per state). One hundred seventy-eight postcards were returned and analyzed; the number reflects an overall response rate of 48.6 percent. Table 1 contains information on the number of postcards and letters sent, as well as return rates by state.

The people who received the postcards varied as a function of the list that was provided. Respondents included program directors, teachers, superintendents, and people listed as "contacts." One state did not list people's names but provided the title of the program and its address. Table 2 is a summary of the roles of the people who completed the postcard survey from each state.

Materials

A postcard was developed to request information about the existence of exit criteria for children aged birth to six in early childhood special education programs. Specifically, the postcard

Table 1

Number of Postcards and Letters Mailed and Return Rates

State	Number of Postcards Sent	Number of Letters Sent	Percent of Postcards Returned
A	49	49	46.9
B	61	61	39.3
C	30	30	53.3
D	170	170	48.8
E	18	9	66.7*
F	13	13	92.3
G	67	27	40.7*
H	7	7	42.9
Total	415	366	42.9
			48.6*

*Percentages calculated based on direct letter mailings

Table 2

Numbers and Titles of People Who Completed the Postcards

State	No Name	Superintendent	Director	Teacher	Contact Person	Total
A	23	--	--	--	--	23
B	--	--	--	--	24	24
C	--	4	7	1	4	16
D	--	--	--	83	--	83
E	--	--	6	--	--	6
F	--	--	12	--	--	12
G	--	--	--	--	11	11
H	--	--	3	--	--	3
Total	23	4	28	84	29	178

asked whether the special education program had written guidelines for determining when a child would no longer receive special services. In addition, a description of the criteria, whether formally or not formally in existence, was requested. Demographic data also were gathered on the numbers and age range of children served in 1983-84 and the location of the program. A copy of the postcard and the cover letter sent with it are included in the Appendix.

Procedure

The target subjects for the postcard survey were local programs serving preschool handicapped children. Contacts were made with the National Association on Education for Young Children (NAEYC), the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the U.S. Department of Education, Special Education Programs, and the technical assistance project serving Handicapped Children's Early Education Programs. No U.S. mailing list of preschool programs for handicapped children was found.

It was decided that a sample of states would be selected, and then their education departments would be contacted to obtain state lists of early childhood programs serving handicapped children aged birth to six. Originally, a sample of 17 states was selected to receive the postcard survey. In order to get an indication of exit criteria used across the United States, the 17 states were selected according to their regional location as defined by the Bureau of Classification of States by Division and Region.

An attempt was made to contact personnel in each of the 17 states who would be most closely linked with early childhood special

education programs (e.g., early childhood special education director) as listed in Patterson's Amercian Education. They were contacted in an effort to obtain a list of early childhood special education programs in their state. This proved to be an inordinately difficult task. In most cases, initial contacts did not have the information requested, and a referral to another person thought to have the information usually was made. At least 38 different numbers were called (usually several times each) in an effort to reach someone who could provide a list of the states' early childhood special education programs. After contact was finally made, responses fell into several categories: (a) yes, I have a list and will send it (n = 5), (b) the list will be difficult to compile/obtain, but I will send it (n = 10), and (c) the list would not be useful because the state has standard exit criteria (n = 2), though it remained questionable whether such a list actually existed. In the end, lists were obtained from eight states, with the provided information varying widely across states.

Results

Information from the postcards was analyzed to determine the extent to which written exit criteria existed. Of the postcards that were returned (N = 178), 75 were marked "Yes," they had written exit criteria, and 96 were marked "No," they did not have written exit criteria. Seven postcards were not marked in either category, although they went on to describe the criteria they used. Table 3 contains a breakdown of the existence of exit criteria according to state.

Table 3

Existence of Exit Criteria (as Marked) According to State

State	Yes		No		No Check Mark[a]	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
A	8	4.5	15	8.4		
B	12	6.7	12	6.7		
C	9	5.0	6	3.3	1	.5
D	30	16.9	49	27.5	4	2.3
E	3	1.7	3	1.7		
F	11	6.2	1	.5		
G	1	.5	8	4.5	2	1.1
H	1	.5	2	1.1		
Total	75	42.1	96	54.0	7	3.9

[a]Postcards with no check marks were counted as Yes's in all other computations.

The postcards responses were analyzed further to see whether the existence of exit criteria varied as a function of the community surveyed. For rural communities, 52 indicated the existence of written exit criteria and 59 indicated "No." Eleven suburban communities and 13 urban indicated "Yes," and 11 suburban and 16 urban indicated "No." Thus, the communities were similarly divided in terms of the existence of criteria by community. Table 4 is a breakdown of postcards by community and the existence of exit criteria.

In order to examine the nature of the exit criteria (both written and actual), categories of criteria for exit were developed: (a) criteria and goals specified in the child's individualized educational plan (IEP), (b) chronological age of the child; (c) state guidelines; (d) discrepancy index of delay (e.g., when the child's functioning is determined to be less than 10% discrepant from his/her chronological age); (e) results of formal testing; (f) results of informal curriculum or classroom assessment; (g) family's location to the program; (h) team decision; (i) professional evaluation (e.g., psychologist, speech clinician); (j) child's individual skill level including his/her developmental age and maturity; (k) original placement criteria that qualified the child for services; (l) parental decisions or family considerations; (m) more appropriate placement available in another program (including least restrictive environment); and (n) any other criteria listed.

Although some of the categories overlap, they were designed to be comprehensive in order to obtain an accurate picture of the criteria

Table 4

Existence of Exit Criteria (as Marked) According to Community

	Yes		No	
	Number	%	Number	%
Rural	52	63.4	59	61.5
Suburban	11	13.4	11	11.5
Urban	13	15.9	16	16.7
Rural and Urban	2	2.4	2	2.0
Suburban and Urban	1	1.2	1	1.0
Rural, Suburban, and Urban	0	0.0	2	2.0
Rural and Suburban	0	0.0	1	1.0
No Information	3	3.7	4	4.2
Total	82		96	

that were specifically described on the postcards. Initially, a sample of 25 postcards ("Yes": N = 11; "No": N = 14) were coded. Interrater agreement using all possible categories to be checked (excluding other) was .97.

Coding of the postcards indicating the existence of written exit criteria revealed an average of 2.3 criteria per card, with a range from zero (N = 2) to 6. Similarly, postcards indicating "No" had an average of 2.3 criteria per card, with a range from zero (N = 10) to 5. The most commonly listed criteria for exit from an early childhood special education program are shown in Table 5. Across all postcards, the child's chronological age was listed most often (48.3%). Thirty-one percent specifically listed results from formal tests as a criteria, followed by exit decisions based on team staffings (23.6%), the child's developmental skill level (22.5%) and alternative program offerings (22.5%).

Table 6 is a breakdown of criteria listed on postcards that marked "Yes." The child's chronological age was the most frequently listed criterion, closely followed by results of formal testing. In addition, exit decisions based on team staffings and exit based on the child's developmental skill level were followed by dismissal based on state guidelines and the existence of more appropriate programming. The seventh most common criterion cited was the use of some type of discrepancy index of delay. Use of professional evaluation, IEPs, curriculum assessment, parental input, original placement criteria, and family location were cited less frequently.

Table 5

Percentage of Total Postcards Describing Criteria

Criteria	Percentage
Age	48.3
Formal Testing	31.5
Team Staffing	23.6
Child's Skill Level	22.5
Other Program Offerings	22.5
Professional Evaluation	15.7
Parents/Family Considerations	12.9
IEP	10.7
Curriculum/Classroom Assessment	10.1
State Guidelines	8.9
Discrepancy Index	8.4
Original Placement Criteria	6.2
Location	2.8

Table 6

Listing of Categories of Criteria by Frequency as Described on Postcards

Postcards Indicating "Yes"	Postcards Indicating "No"
Age (35)	Age (51)
Formal Testing (32)	Other Program Offerings (26)
Team Staffing (16)	Team Staffing (26)
Child's Develomental Level (16)	Child's Developmental Level (24)
State Guidelines (15)	Formal Testing (24)
Other Program Offerings (14)	Parental Input (17)
Discrepancy Index (12)	Professional Evaluation (16)
Professional Evaluation (12)	Curriculum Based Assessment (11)
IEP (11)	IEP (8)
Curriculum Based Assessment (7)	Original Placement Criteria (5)
Original Placement Criteria (6)	Discrepancy Index (3)
Parental Index (6)	State Guidelines (1)
Location (5)	Location (0)

Postcards indicating that no written criteria existed also most frequently listed the child's chronological age as determining exit from a program. This criterion was followed by exit based on team staffings and the existence of more appropriate programming. The child's developmental skill level, results of formal testing, parental input and professional evaluation followed in frequency. Exit based on the child's IEP, program's original placement criteria, and curriculum assessment, were infrequently cited. In addition, family location, state guidelines, and use of a discrepancy index were the least commonly cited criteria for postcards indicating no formal written exit criteria.

Comparison of the criteria between "Yes" postcards and "No" postcards reveals many similarities. By examining the rank order of criteria listed, it appears that chronological age is the primary basis for determining whether a child should exit from a program. Decisions based on team staffings and the child's developmental level rank third and fourth, respectively, for both "Yes" and "No" postcards. In addition, decisions based on IEP review and location were ranked similarly (9th and 13th, respectively). However, some significant differences also appear to exist between the criteria for exit listed by programs with formal written exit criteria and those without. For example, those with formal written exit criteria listed the use of state guidelines ($z = 3.78$, $p = .0001$) and some sort of discrepancy formula index ($z = 2.86$, $p = .0021$) and formal testing ($z = 2.14$, $p = .0162$) more frequently than those without formal written

exit criteria. Those programs that did not have formal written exit criteria listed the availability of alternative programming ($z = 1.67$, $p = .0475$) and parental input ($z = 2.29$, $p = .011$) as criteria more frequently than programs that had formal exit criteria.

Discussion

Early childhood special education programs across the U.S. were surveyed to obtain information about factors that are used to decide whether a child is ready to exit from a program. Extensive efforts were made to obtain lists of preschool programs nationally and by state. These efforts met with minimal success. It appears that comprehensive listings of such programs are not in existence at the national level and are rarely in existence at the state level.

Results that were obtained from the postcard survey of the eight states distributed across four regions proved to be highly informative. Of the postcards that were returned, approximately half indicated that their program had written criteria and half indicated that they did not. The most commonly cited criteria for children exiting a program was chronological age. This finding is not surprising. But, if it is the sole criterion, it precludes exit decisions based on factors that are directly related to the child's needs for services. Fortunately, the results suggest that other factors do play a prominant role in determining whether a child will exit from a particular program. Among these factors are formal test results, team staffing decisions, the child's developmental skill level, and other program offerings.

Programs with formal written exit criteria use formal testing, state guidelines, and/or a discrepancy formula index as a basis for making exit decisions more often than programs that do not have formal written exit criteria. This is in accordance with the growing number of states that mandate services and eligibility criteria for preschool handicapped (U.S. Department of Education, 1985). In contrast, it appears that programs without formal written criteria rely more on the availability of other more appropriate programming, and parental input to make exit decisions.

In any case, the basis for dismissing children from a particular program varies widely from program to program across and within states. Currently, it appears that programs define their exit criteria in a number of different ways, with very little consistency. In order for children to benefit equally from services they receive and not get caught in a revolving door syndrome with no exit or unpredictable exit, criteria must be defined, developed, and implemented. States have begun to develop guidelines for exit criteria. For example, in Minnesota three points are included in recommended exit criteria for early childhood special education programs (Bettenburg, 1984):

(1) When data document that the child has: (a) achieved all IEP goals and objectives, and (b) demonstrated through systematic observation during a predetermined trial period, the ability to function in his/her non-special education environment without the provision of special education instructions and related services; or

(2) when the child can more appropriately be served in another special education program or setting; or

(3) when the child has reached age seven by September 1, unless a program variance has been obtained from the Special Education Section of the Minnesota Department of Education.

Figure 1 contains an example of discharge criteria as designated by an achievement center in Vermont. Such efforts to define exit criteria in terms of several factors directly tied to the child's needs must be continued.

Figure 1

Discharge Criteria From Vermont Achievement Center

1. The annual review meeting which is attended by the involved V.A.C. staff, parents of the child, and the Special Education Coordinator and other representatives from the child's school district, occurs during the Spring. The child's educational and therapeutic needs are discussed and placement for the upcoming school year is decided by the group. A child will be discharged from the Vermont Achievement Center if the following applies:

   a) The IEP service needs for the upcoming school year can be met by the local school system.

   b) A decision is made that continued placement is not appropriate due to lack of progress or change in the child. The three involved parties will then work together to seek a more appropriate placement.

   c) Placement criteria has been met.

2. A child can be discharged anytime during the school year for the following reasons:

   a) Child moves out of state.

   b) Parents or local education agent withdraws the child from the School/Therapy Program.

   c) The child's enrollment jeopardizes the health and safety of himself/herself and other students.

      Note: V.A.C. would initiate a staffing with the involved parties in all three cases.

3. Once the child leaves, discharge reports will be forwarded to the child's new educational placement.

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Appendix A

Cover Letter and Postcard

College of Education

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
TWIN CITIES

Early Childhood Assessment Project
Department of Educational Psychology
350 Elliott Hall
75 East River Road
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455

Dear Colleague:

We are conducting a nationwide postcard survey of preschool programs that serve handicapped children. Our main interest in this survey is to determine what factors are used to decide that a child is ready to leave a special early intervention program, or whether age is the sole criterion.

Please help us by filling out the postcard and mailing it today. With the information from this survey and from other research, we hope to identify approaches to assessment and intervention that are useful to all programs working with preschool handicapped children. Please return the card even if you are unable to provide the requested information, and briefly indicate your reason for not completing it. This will help us determine whether our response sample is representative.

The postcard also asks for minimal information about your program to help us identify demographic factors that may be related to exit criteria. The ID number on the postcard identifies your state and helps us calculate the response rate to the survey. All data obtained from the survey will be reported in aggregate only.

Space is provided on the postcard for the name of an exemplary early education teacher. We plan to talk to some of these teachers about how instructional decisions are made for handicapped preschoolers. If you know an exemplary teacher whom you think might be willing to talk to us, please provide that information on the card also.

Thank you for taking the time to help us.

Sincerely,

James E. Ysseldyke

James E. Ysseldyke, Ph.D.
Principal Investigator

JEY:rjw

Enclosure

College of Education

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
TWIN CITIES

Early Childhood Assessment Project
Department of Educational Psychology
350 Elliott Hall
75 East River Road
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455

Dear Early Childhood Program Contact Person:

We are conducting a nationwide postcard survey of preschool programs that serve handicapped children. Our main interest in this survey is to determine what factors are used to decide that a child is ready to leave a special early intervention program, or whether age is the sole criterion.

We were unable to obtain a list of early childhood special education programs in your state, but we were given your name as a contact person. Please help us by distributing these postcards to programs in your district so that they can be completed. With the information from this survey and from other research, we hope to identify approaches to assessment and intervention that are useful to all programs working with preschool handicapped children. If you are unable to distribute the postcard, please fill it out as accurately as possible. Please return the cards even if you are unable to provide requested information, and briefly indicate your reason for not completing them. This will help us to determine whether our response sample is representative.

The postcard also asks for minimal information about programs to help us identify demographic factors that may be related to exit criteria. The ID number on the postcard identifies your state and helps us calculate response rate to the survey. All data obtained from the survey will be reported in aggregate only.

Space is provided on the postcard for the name of an exemplary early education teacher. We plan to talk to some of these teachers about how instructional decisions are made for handicapped preschoolers. If you, or the program director to whom the postcard is delivered, know of an exemplary teacher who might be willing to talk to us, please provide that information on the card also.

Thank you for taking the time to help us.

Sincerely,

James E. Ysseldyke

James E. Ysseldyke, Ph.D.
Principal Investigator

JEY:rjw

Enclosure

P.S. Please feel free to xerox postcards and distribute them if more than two early childhood special education programs exist in your region.

ID#_____

Does your program have written exit criteria for preschool handicapped children (i.e., specific guidelines for determining when a child will no longer receive special services)? ___YES ___NO

If YES, describe your criteria briefly. If NO, indicate how you determine that individual students should move out of your program.

Check one: ___ RURAL ___SUBURBAN ___ URBAN

Total number of handicapped preschool children served in 1983-84? _____

Range of ages (in years) served in 1983-84? _____

Please identify an exemplary teacher serving handicapped preschoolers.

Name:_____

Address:_____

_____

Telephone:( )_____

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University of Minnesota

No. 1 Preschool screening in Minnesota: 1982-83 by M. L. Thurlow, J. E. Ysseldyke, & P. O'Sullivan (August, 1985).

No. 2 Current screening and diagnostic practices for identifying young handicapped children by J. E. Ysseldyke, M. L. Thurlow, P. O'Sullivan, & R. A. Bursaw (September, 1985).

No. 3 Instructional decision-making practices of teachers of preschool handicapped children by J. E. Ysseldyke, P. A. Nania, & M. L. Thurlow (September, 1985).

No. 4 Exit criteria in early childhood programs for handicapped children by M. L. Thurlow, C. A. Lehr, & J. E. Ysseldyke (September, 1985).

No. 5 Predicting outcomes in a statewide preschool screening program using demographic factors by J. E. Ysseldyke & P. O'Sullivan (October, 1985).

No. 6 An ecological study of school districts with high and low preschool screening referral rates by. J. E. Ysseldyke, M. L. Thurlow, J. A. Weiss, C. A. Lehr, & R. A. Bursaw (October, 1985).